TELLS THE FACTS AND NAMES THE NAMES

CounterPunch

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Out of Crisis Comes Opportunity
Is the Left Ready with Ideas and Programs?

By Alexander Cockburn

From the aftermath of wars, whether endured as victories or defeats, spring the opportunities for change. The twentieth century is flush with examples, stretching from the Russian revolution to the creative surge here in America after the rout in Vietnam.

By its very nature capitalism is war, and the savage reverses for capitalism, the gaping wounds in its pretensions, comprise the single most salient feature in the world today. Whether in the collapse in the western banking system, the agonies of post-Soviet economies like the Baltic and Eastern European countries, the rubble of Indian neoliberal policies, the economic mantras of an entire generation are going up in smoke. For the left it should be a time of unrivalled opportunity.

Take as an example the shopping mall, which changed the American landscape within the course of a generation.

The left, by and large, never much cared for malls. They represented privatized space, the collapse of the public realm and the freedoms – of association and public protest – protected in public space. Malls, whether in strip or covered form, symbolized a conversion of people from citizens to consumers, the death of Main Street, architecture reduced to utter banalization, without even the pzazz that allowed Venturi, Brown and Izenour to write *Learning from Las Vegas* in 1972.

Today, mirroring the distress in the mother ship of capitalism, its colonies and settlements are in decay. Take

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50 Years After the Dalai Lama's Flight
Paths to Tibet's Survival

By Chaohua Wang

When a riot broke out in Lhasa on March 14 last year, followed by further riots erupting over a large stretch of Tibetan areas in western China before being suppressed by armed police forces, commentators all noticed that it happened around the anniversary of the Dalai Lama's flight from China 49 years earlier. The general understanding is that the lamas and resentful Tibetans would like to have protested on the occasion of a more symbolic date, the 50th anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising, which falls in this year, 2009. However, to take advantage of the Beijing summer Olympics, with the world's attention focused on China, the expected explosion was detonated a year earlier.

Ironically for the Tibetans, their protests gave Beijing a strong warning to be alarmed and to be ready for this year's anniversary. By now, there have been heavy military deployments across all Tibetan regions, in addition to heightened security. "Strike hard" campaigns had rounded up hundreds of "criminals" by official counts, which have included people having "reactionary opinions," "illegally" downloading "reactionary music," also those who are spreading rumors that incite ethnic tensions. The official Xinhua news agency has reported that dozens have been sentenced, without giving details of their trials. Access originally granted to foreign journalists during the Olympics has been revoked, and all roads leading to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) are closed to foreigners, at least through March.

This means that undeclared martial law is in place for the majority of Tibetan people living in and along the border of TAR (control outside the TAR is reported to be relatively loose), with repeated raids in neighborhoods and special camps for lamas taken from many large monasteries, where after lengthy political sessions they were forced to denounce the Dalai Lama. An American anthropologist staying in Tibet during and after the March riots last year experienced firsthand what it was alike to be living under such conditions: constantly watching over one's shoulders and words, lest casual comments endanger friends; turning away one's eyes and ears "voluntarily" from "troubles," when official control already made access to information next to impossible.* Beijing's preemptive strategy has brought this state of life back to the Tibetans.

March was always certain to be a month of high tension, particularly for this year, when the ritual-filled holy first month (Monlam) in the Tibetan calendar began on February 25, in addition to a series of dates marking the 1959 uprising, beginning with March 10. March 17 saw the Dalai Lama leaving Lhasa; and on March 28 the central government in Beijing, through the People's Liberation Army (PLA) commanders in Lhasa, declared final victory over the rebels. In January this year, Beijing announced that a new TAR memorial day is scheduled for March 28, entitled "Emancipation Day of a Million Serfs." Meanwhile, a grassroots campaign has been raging via text messaging and cell phones among Tibetans to boycott the New Year festivities and in their stead to mourn those who died in last year's suppression. On all sides, the politicizing effect leaves almost no stone unturned.

One thing is clear. In the latest rounds across the last year of the struggle for

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the Bayshore Mall in my own town of Eureka, northern California – a covered, pedestrian arcade opened in the 1980s, owned by the Utah-based General Growth company. Located on the edge of Humboldt Bay, though facing the opposite direction toward Highway 101, our mall was an optimistic place in the early days. People dressed up to go there. A friend of mine who opened a coffee stall wore a tie – purchasing it from Ralph Lauren which opened an outlet. Every pretty girl in Humboldt County wanted to work there, to see and to be seen. People drove for three hours through the Yolly Bolly Wilderness all the way from Redding in the Central Valley to savor its glories. There were stylish concerts in its ample food court.

Today the Bayshore Mall moulders, embodying the misfortunes of General Growth – the second largest mall owner in the U.S. – whose stock now trades for 55 cents, down from $44 last May. General Growth has now ousted its CEO, John Bucksbaum, (who is related to Ann Bucksbaum, wife of Thomas Friedman, world's wealthiest pundit.) In 2006, the value of General Growth Properties was estimated at about $2.7 billion. Last October 8, *Business Week* headlined an article, "General Growth Properties Staggers Under Debt Load" (of $27 billion!!)

Some major retailers, like Lauren's Polo, have long since fled from Bayshore Mall. Walk east along one of the arcades and you come to a wall of plywood, behind which lies the desolation that was Mervyn's, a clothing chain which has now filed for bankruptcy. The little stores nearby have a somber mien, like people compelled to live in the chill shadow of a funeral home. The food court, serviced by six or seven fast food businesses, is becoming a sanctuary for the poor, who sit in the warmth with modest snacks and while away the hours.

We're at that stage that Thurman Arnold captured so wittily in his 1937 book, *The Folklore of Capitalism*. Arnold, from Laramie, Wyoming, was installed as head of the Justice Department's Anti-Trust Division when FDR swerved to the left amid the slump of 1937.

Over the past 40 years some 200 cities across the country built pedestrian malls. Today, only 30 remain. Drive around any town and one can see strip malls in similar decline, their parking lots nearly empty, boarded stores in the retail frontage like a mouth losing its teeth, as the lights of Circuit City go out and Linen 'n Things, Zales, Ann Taylor and Sharper Image retrench or collapse entirely.

Out of crisis comes opportunity, one that's been discussed for some years by movements such as the New Urbanists and crusaders for the refashioning of the American urban landscape such as James Howard Kunstler, author of *The Geography of Nowhere*. A mall can be razed to the ground, like the Belle Promenade on the west bank of the Mississippi in New Orleans. Eureka is too poor a town to do that. But a mall can be refashioned into a more congenial quarter, albeit one blessed with easier parking.

In the same way that coastal cities finally realized the asset of nineteenth-century quaysides with their warehouses and customs depots, today's failed or failing malls can be reconfigured, converted to mixed use, with residential housing, public spaces and constructive social uses. In the Bayshore, even now I see groups of the mentally ill being brought along for an outing in a place that's sheltered, still physically safe, and equipped with bathrooms and plenty of space with chairs or benches where they can relax.

In many towns one can imagine that energetic councils and resourceful financing could offer the reeling mall operators terms and take the properties off their hands, reconfiguring the malls as social assets.

On the larger economic front, similar reconstructive engineering for the public good is vital, however adamantly Wall Street, Timothy Geithner, Larry Summmers and President Obama may proclaim earnestly that the architecture of "free enterprise" capitalism must be preserved. We're at that stage that Thurman Arnold captured so wittily in his 1937 book, *The Folklore of Capitalism*. Arnold, from Laramie, Wyoming, was installed as head of the Justice Department's Anti-Trust Division, when FDR swerved to the left amid the slump of 1937. No greater foe of the corporate cartel than Arnold ever worked in government service in Washington.

In an early chapter, "The Folklore of 1937", Arnold describes with vivid humor the tenacity with which supporters of untrammeled "private enterprise" held to beliefs whose operating principles had engendered the Great Depression. He likened it to the University of Paris insisting in the seventeenth century that bleeding was still the cure for malaria, even though quinine, promoted by the Jesuits in Peru, seemed to offer a more effective remedy. But, Arnold wrote, "The medieval physician could see no profit in saving a man's body if thereby he lost his soul. Nor did he think that any temporary physical relief could ever be worth the violation of the fundamental principles of medicine. The remedy for fever was the art of bleeding to rid the body of those noxious vapors and humors in the blood which were the root of illness. Of

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Tibet, the Tibetan opposition inside and outside the border of the People's Republic of China (PRC) is fighting to win the hearts and minds of the masses under the battle standard of Tibetan national identity, whereas Beijing is calculating on the combined effect of violent coercion and commercial incentives to bring about surrender to its rule. Except for skimming the revenues for religious tourism, nowadays Beijing cares very little about Tibet's cultural heritage and Tibetans' sense of national belonging. Even the rhetoric of "emancipating serfs" is not directed at winning over the Tibetan masses. It aims more at propaganda campaigns against Western media and the Dalai Lama's "clique."

It was not always thus in China, or in the history of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

In the 1930s, the CCP entertained the idea of Soviet-style ethnic republics, albeit for a short period only and well before it came to power in 1949. Still, the idea of ethnic equality remained strong. Before 1958, the PRC was actually very enthusiastic about identifying and developing minority nationalities within its territorial boundaries. Ethnographical teams were sent out and *in toto* 55 ethnic "nationalities" were identified. At least 14 written scripts were created for 12 ethnic groups that never had developed ones before, and many existing scripts were consolidated and reformed within the ethnic communities in question. These actions were generally halted by 1958, the year of the Great Leap Forward, and further impeded by the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, for the sake of "speeding up and running directly into communism" that would no longer need to acknowledge ethnic differences. The subsequent economic recessions, understandably, had their worst impact, and lasted much longer in minority ethnic areas than in Han regions, due partly to severe cultural and linguistic damage. In the CCP's effort to redress wrongdoings after the Cultural Revolution, there was a short period of beneficial ethnic policy in 1977-1985, which, unfortunately, slowed down to an almost complete stop in the Nineties, thanks to the central government's developmental stance that focused on economic growth and almost nothing else. By official statistics in 2005, ethnic minorities form 8.41 per cent of China's total population, up to 10 million in absolute numbers that include six million Tibetans. However, 45 per cent of the total population at the poverty level were minorities. Of officially identified "poverty counties" across the country, minority ethnic autonomous counties once again constituted 45 per cent of the total.

In the rush to commodify China in the past three decades, many old values have been lost. Sensitivity to questions of ethnic equality was never strong in Chinese consciousness in the past, and it has been further screened by banal slogans, such as "getting rich is glorious" or "building up harmonious society," promoted by generations of Communist Party leaders. When trafficked child laborers of the Yi nationality were discovered by journalists in the manufacturing hub of Dongguan in Guangdong last year, despite their non-Han names, sympathetic reports and NGO helpers appeared all ethnic-blind, merely saying that the child laborers were from the poor mountainous area of west Sichuan. Similarly, the devastating earthquake in Sichuan last May had its epicenter in China's only Qiang Ethnic Autonomous County, destroying precious cultural relics as well as people's lives. Yet, blanket media coverage in China and abroad rarely mentioned the fact. It drew broader attention only after volunteers from Taiwan stressed the issue. Most of the smaller ethnic communities have been largely Sinified, with the assimilation process speeding up alarmingly in the past two decades. Officially, Sinification is so "natural" and "harmonious" that discussions addressing non-Han ethnic identity are officially classified as "rumors" provoking ethnic tensions and therefore open to legal sanction and punishment.

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There are pragmatic rationales behind Beijing's ethnic policy. Even if ethnic minorities are less than 10 per cent of China's total population, they occupy 64 per cent of the PRC's entire territory. A large proportion of this 64 per cent consists of inhabited areas that are historically Tibetan – today's TAR and the East Belt region of old Khampa and Ando, divided into the western or southern regions of four adjacent Chinese provinces with enclaves of other minority communities. Tibet, as most other minority regions, also lies along a very long stretch of China's 22,000 kilometers of inland border with other countries. It is not rare to read comments on Tibet's geographically strategic position, not only by anonymous inhabitants of the Internet but also by university professors and think tank members. Today China views Tibet less as the historical home territory for an ethnic community than as a resource-rich border region that is at the same time strategically important in military terms.

Tibet was the last minority area to be

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fully brought into the PRC's fold, facilitated partly by the Dalai Lama's flight 50 years ago. As with other minority groups, the PRC used to accord Tibetan culture high importance, training experts in the language, collecting and reprinting rare books from the past and, when cultural projects slid down the priority list in the Nineties, pouring money into the Tibetan Autonomous Region for subsidized economic development. Have Tibetan areas been experiencing "cultural genocide," as the Dalai Lama claims? Yes and No. Yes, because official documents issued by the TAR government are nowadays mostly written in Chinese, often without any Tibetan translation. Most governmental meetings are conducted in Mandarin Chinese instead of Tibetan; recruitment examinations for civil servant positions are mostly conducted in Chinese instead of Tibetan. Elementary schools for Tibetan children in Lhasa have adapted to using Chinese as first language and Tibetan as the second. The main reason for such phenomena is the PRC's policy with top official appointments. The CCP simply couldn't trust any Tibetans to be at the top of the TAR leadership. The position of Party secretary, the real boss of the region, has been held by Han Chinese – one after another for decades. They were often transferred in short notice from other regions and did never feel the pressure to learn the native language.

The political re-education sessions forced upon every Tibetan inside China since the riots last year have been the most humiliating experience to the young, educated Tibetans, particularly those living in Han Chinese cities. Many of them actually command only spoken Tibetan, unable to express themselves fully in written Tibetan, let alone to sustain that language's beauty in some living, rejuvenating form for future generations. This deeper sense of national peril has been simply reinforced by Beijing's crude and cruel tactics against their fellow Tibetans remaining on the Roof of the World. It is not by accident that Tibetan students across the country, from Beijing to Lanzhou and Chengdu, threw themselves into campus protests in the aftermath of military quelling of the riot last year. Most of these incidents were blocked from media coverage.

On the other hand, with more than 80 per cent of the Tibetan population still living as farmers and going to rural schools or Buddhist monasteries that teach Tibetan as first language, there is no immanent danger of Tibetan culture disappearing from the world. On the contrary, with commercialization and loosened political control in East Tibet in particular, there have been more Tibetan periodicals in China's Tibetan areas than ever before, much more lively than Tibetan print culture in the exile communities in northern India. Growing tourism, encouraged by Beijing with preferential policies and extra investment, has brought many Tibetan youth into closer contact with their tradition than, say, 30 years ago. They are creating lively cultural life in Tibetan cities and towns not just for tourists but also for themselves, including Tibetan pop music and modern arts. As with their Han counterparts, what is needed is formal political recognition and protection of their rights. Tibetans yearn for greater freedom to develop their national identity, and it is in this context that for younger Tibetans the Dalai Lama is an important political symbol whereas for older generations it is the transcendental dimension of the Dalai Lama's symbolic image that provides solace in an age of great loss and change. A Dalai Lama representing not only Tibetan culture and religion but its politics as well arouses alarm in Beijing.

The political re-education sessions forced upon every Tibetan inside China since the riots last year have been the most humiliating experience to the young, educated Tibetans.

Unlike Xinjiang Province to the northwest or Inner Mongolia to the northeast, Tibet had never hosted sustained Han communities prior to 1951. Traditional Tibetan society was, of course, no Shangri La. Yet it had its own social structures and institutions that were highly integrated with Tibetan Buddhism but also included an intricate and at times, grotesquely cruel penal code. These structures were far less modeled on the Han Chinese example than premodern Korean socio-political institutions. As many Han Chinese argue, traditional Tibetan society would have been under pressure to modernize anyway, and it would have been better had Tibetan people have recognized this and appreciated what China – read "Han Chinese" for most Tibetans today – has done for them. Why, in the 21st century, should they want to stick to an outdated socio-political mode?

This argument assumes that China has not only ended a feudal society in Tibet but also successfully conferred the blessings of separation of religion and politics to the Tibetan people. Unfortunately, this may not be what the Communist Party leaders think in their Zhongnanhai compounds in central Beijing. The Chinese do not have a very strong, integrated religious tradition. It is not very difficult for the Chinese elites to lead a godless revolution or to tolerate laymen's religious activities. And, given corruption in these elites, they also have their eyes on the commercial rake-off on these activities, as was prevailing in the East Tibetan areas before last year's riots. This is far from a principled position in regard to the separation of religion from politics. On the contrary, what the state wants to do is to patronize Tibetan Buddhism, driving toward total control as long as it possesses the politically dangerous ability to mobilize the masses. In the scuffle over choosing the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama in 1989-1995, Beijing already showed its cynical face in the matter, quoting numerous historical precedents under the Manchu rule (1644-1911) to legitimize its own meddling in the matter. The Dalai Lama-designated boy has been held incommunicado by the authorities and a Beijing-approved boy has been officially presented as the new, or 11th Panchen Lama. As the Tibetan historian Tsering Shakya commented late last year, we, Tibetans, very much want to modernize, but whenever there is a dispute, the central government would force us to turn back to a pre-20th century way of life.

It is generally believed that the Chinese government is patiently waiting for the day when a reincarnation procedure will have to be enacted under its control inside China, in order to choose a successor to the current Dalai Lama. With this thinking firmly in their minds, when-

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ever social unrest breaks out in Tibetan areas, the authorities would jump upon all Tibetans, forcing them one by one to make public denunciations against the current Dalai Lama. Amazingly, or maybe not by accident, the method is exactly the same applied to all Chinese in the PRC during the Cultural Revolution. However, with his charisma and international standing, whatever happens to him in the future, the 14th Dalai Lama is bound to become another legend in Tibetan cultural memory, in exactly the same way as one of his predecessors, the sixth Dalai Lama – a romantic poet, fondly remembered in Tibetan folklore. In other words, instead of turning the Dalai Lama into one of its own political assets, Beijing has created a formidable windmill to tilt against forever. But it is, probably, wishful thinking to assume the Chinese government is competing with the Dalai Lama for the people's minds and hearts. If we put this part of the Tibetan story side by side with Beijing's decision to establish "Emancipation Day" without promising any new political or cultural emancipation, it is clear that the heart of the Tibetan people has scant weight in the mind of Beijing, at least not to the point where ethnic equality might carry any significance.

Tibetan Buddhism has been in an agonized state, even with the boom in religious tourism; Tibetan language has been under siege; Tibetan politics seems moribund in seeking either "genuine autonomy" or independence or democracy. It seems as if every fault lies with Beijing and the Dalai Lama is completely innocent. The reality may not be so simple. In a highly insightful article,** Pankaj Mishra reviews the Dalai Lama's doctrine of Buddhism with a critical eye, believing that the Dalai Lama is responsible for turning an intellectually rich tradition into cheap sale for the taste of his Western middle-class audience. "In best-selling books by the Dalai Lama," Mishra says, "Buddhism can appear to be a ritual-free mental workout, but the form that religion takes for the geshe student cramming the three hundred and twenty-two volumes of the Tibetan Buddhist canon is considerably more severe."

Granted, Buddhist monasteries in the Ando area may be under pressure from commercialization and the footfall of corruption, but their weakness may not be completely unrelated to the weakened intellectual sinews of Tibetan Buddhism itself, partly thanks to the Dalai Lama's decision to embark on a popularizing path in the West.

If the question of religion may be understood as reluctant political compromise by the exiled spiritual leader, questions concerning language and democratizing politics show rather the leader's political indecisiveness and lack of real vision.

Of all minority languages within the PRC, Korean is probably the only one that has its own singular vitality. Of course, this is not the result of any principled policy by the state but rather because of the existence of the two Koreas right at China's door. Still, this vitality can tell us something about helping a seemingly doomed language, if one really means to do something about it. Understandably, the Tibetan government-in-exile at Dharamsala, India, may not have abundant resource for extra educational projects. Still, it is a question of either sidelining the Tibetan language as the preserve of older lamas or allowing it to acquire new life with the younger generation. When everything can be taught and learned in English, when promising youngsters aspire to attend schools in England or America, how can the Tibetan language has a better fate in Dharamsala than it is in today's Lhasa? One way to improve the situation, I believe, is to launch mass translation projects, volunteer-based or minimally paid, to have all kinds of books translated into Tibetan. New vocabulary will push its way into daily life and the literacy level of the lay people could greatly benefit. Such effort, provided that it could be put into practice, might create gaps between the language used in Dharamsala and that being used inside China, in the same manner as Mandarin Chinese experienced across the Taiwan Strait, before re-juncture, to some extent, since the Nineties. Still, if it is a matter of life or death, the decision will have to be made.

It is generally believed that the Chinese government is patiently waiting for the day when a reincarnation procedure will have to be enacted under its control inside China, in order to choose a successor to the current Dalai Lama.

Politically, Dharamsala probably needs to do the same as Beijing should do: seek a genuine way of separating politics and religion. The Dalai Lama has made many suggestions about democratizing the government-in-exile, as well as about how to decide the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama after himself. However, there is still not a clear position on the issue. Tibetans inside the TAR might all harbor their faith in Buddhism and the 14th Dalai Lama. In reality and particularly in urban areas, life on the ground has been organized separately from that centered in the monasteries. For a potential future "reunification" of the exiles and the remaining population, secularizing the administrative apparatus would be a minimal common objective for both sides. But maybe it is already too late for the current Dalai Lama to enact drastic measures among the exiles, for financial or health reasons in addition to political obstacles.

The Tibetans' is a sad story, with many twists in its way to this day. Despite all the political maneuvers over Tibet around the world, I want to send my best wishes to all those who are enduring martial law conditions in the TAR and neighboring Tibetan areas right now. **CP**

*Charlene Makley, "Ballooning Unrest: Tibet, State Violence, and the Incredible Lightness of Knowledge," in *China in 2008: A Year of Great Significance*, edited by Kate Merkel-Hess, Kenneth Pomeranz, and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming. According to Makley, there was a riot in Qinghai on February 21, 2008, three weeks earlier and a precursor to the Lhasa one.

**Pankaj Mishra, "Holy Man: What does the Dalai Lama actually stand for?" *The New Yorker* (3/31/08).

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course, patients sickened and died in the process, but they were dying for a medical principle…"

Is there a better description for the Republicans opposing the stimulus plan on principle, or Geithner stoutly proclaiming his zeal to preserve the banking system as presently constituted?

Opportunity is there, to be seized from the jaws of capitalism's shattering reverses. This is a chance richer than the opportunity offered and annulled in the mid-70s. Circumstances will in all likelihood push Obama's government to the left, just as they did FDR when orthodoxy failed. The left should not be shy about pressing the challenge out of some misguided notion of preserving a polite progressive consensus. From the malls to the commanding heights of the economy, let the Reconquest begin.

I write these fine words about Reconquest, but must in all honesty add that the problem here is the depleted state of the left. In the early 1930s there was still a vital left movement, which FDR and his associates viewed both as a threat and as a resource. It ranged across the spectrum from the Commmunist Party through the various Trotskyist groupings to prairie populists and kindred veterans of innumerable radical enterprises. As FDR moved from one strategy to the next, he and his counselors could staff the new organizations with economists, regulators, supervisors and technicians with vigorous left credentials and training. People like Thurman Arnold made their way to Washington, seized with conviction that this was a season of unrivalled opportunity for the left.

Looking across Obama's team one can count on the fingers of one hand economists from the left… One can scarcely blame Obama and Biden's transition crews for ignoring the left if the talent pool is almost dry.

Contrast that with the present situation. Looking across Obama's team, one can count on the fingers of one hand economists from the left, starting with Vice President Joe Biden's chief economist Jared Bernstein from the Economic Policy Institute. Obama's "green jobs" program is taken almost word for word from prof. Robert Pollin's writings, though Pollin himself – one of the country's leading left economists – remains at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Reading the stentorian calls from *CounterPunch* writers for national takeover of the banks and the inauguration of a new, radical economic regime, one has to ask, Where are the left officers and ground troops necessary to carry forward such a task? One can scarcely blame Obama and Biden's transition crews for ignoring the left if the talent pool is almost dry.

Thirty years ago, one could go to conferences of the Union of Radical Political Economists and see hundreds eagerly attending seminars and plenary sessions. What became of them? Did they all decide that the way to fame and fortune lay through Wall Street? **CP**

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